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ABSTRACT

Investigating the general hypothesis that word connotations differ between black and white youth peer groups, the author solicited personal reactions among black and white eleventh- and twelfth-graders to a list of twelve current complimentary and "fighting" jargon words. This hypothesis was accepted, and three others were suggested and developed; (1) Interpretations of word meaning by members of one racial community are often partially modified or completely changed by another racial community; (2) Where a clear experience of separate language socialization characterizes each racial community, conflict is likely to be derived from, if not exacerbated by, language differentiation; and (3) Lack of recognition of different word meanings in various racial groups by controlling groups strengthens the inter-racial communications barrier as well as the communication barrier between the total black and white community and the controlling groups. (Author/DB)

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"Some Observations and Comments
on Interracial Sociolinguistic Language Behavior
of High School Youth"

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In increasing numbers high school youth are participants in moderate to intense forms of violent social conflict. As a result, the climate of learning has been one of destructive tensions rather than constructive educational processes. The cause of these conflicts frequently can be traced to factors within the setting of the bi-racial school. One major element in this complex tension build up in schools is the language patterns of speech and their various meanings to the respective peer groups. These patterns seem to create barriers between these groups and often between the entire student body and the officialdom of administrators and teachers.

Recent disturbances in River Rouge, Michigan, and observations from my perspective as a teacher have illustrated that in fact a communication barrier does exist. The trial that came out of the River Rouge disturbances of January 1970 specifically was focused on this barrier. While Michigan Law does not allow conviction based on evidence of fighting words, such words do provoke attacks on the insulting party. This is especially true if one of the persons happens to be black and the other white. The author, in consultation with the defense attorney, was prompted to test this notion that word connotations

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are different for each racial youth peer group. While the sample was small for the brief survey run, it included proportionate numbers of both black and white youth representing the various status levels of the respective communities. There were twenty-five white eleventh and twelfth grade students and twenty-three black eleventh and twelfth grade students.[1] As the racial disturbance in River Rouge High School was supposedly the result of "fighting words", several of these as well as some words from the current teen-age argot were included in the survey questionnaire. Each group of students was asked to respond to these words when said in two different situations. The first situation was described as follows:

> Now suppose a person of your own age and the same race as you--a white person speaking to a white person or a black person speaking to a black person--How would you feel (about each one of these words when they were said to you)?

Situation two asked for the students' reaction to the same words in an interracial setting:

> Now suppose a person of your own age but a different race from yours--a white person speaking to a black person or a black person speaking to a white person--uses one of these words, how would you feel?

Though there were twelve words on the survey form, only ten seemed to elicit either strong positive or strong negative reactions. As these words are almost equally divided between "fighting words" and complementary words, they offer an excellent base for this analysis and tentative proof of the major hypotheses. These words are:

Bold
Together

Cool
Bright
A Punk
A Son of a Bitch
An Ass
A Bastard
A Pig
A Freak
A Pimp
A Motherfucker

The students were given four defined categories and one which allowed them to state in their own words either more precise or stronger feelings. The categories--feel good, don't care, feel bad, feel angry, and something else--were pointedly weighted toward the negative and fighting feelings as this was the emphasis of the survey and we wanted to define the degrees of negative emotions that were attached to these fighting words if at all possible. In a third part of the questionnaire, a question--Would any of these words we have listed make you angry enough to fight another person if he said them to you in a group at school?--was asked. The answers ranged from very negative reactions to remarks indicating that several students would keep peace at all costs. These will be quoted later on.

The data from the survey was collated into six tables. Tables I and II are a simple count of the responses under the various categories of feelings for each word. It is interesting to note that the "something else" category unanimously means "fight" to both black and white respondents when they indicated that the other four did not express their reactions adequately. Tables III and IV are analyses of the simple count of the different responses. The categories were weighted numerically as follows:

Feel Good	+1
Don't Care	0
Feel Bad	-1
Feel Angry	-2

The rationale for such weighting is that being angry is clearly different from feeling bad. This discrepancy was especially revealed in the students' comments. Therefore, by treating good and bad as equal opposites and adding another degree of negative feeling to angry, we were able to determine a finer degree of the emotional response to these "fighting words". The differential in Tables III and IV numerically describes the shift or change in the respondents' attitude towards the implication of the meaning of each word when spoken in a bi-racial setting as opposed to an intra-racial setting. As Table III is the analysis of the black students responses--and Table IV is the analysis of the white students responses, the differentials, when compared, reveal that there is a definite reversal in feelings among the black students when a white student utters these words than when a fellow black student does. That it works, also, but not to the same extent, in a positive way with the complementary words is encouraging. What the statistics reveal is that white students express a wider negative differential with the words bright and together, no differential at all with such words as motherfucker and bastard, and a small positive differential with the word freak. This would be appropriate, it seems, in that bright and together coming from a black student to a white student, while complimentary, would perhaps seem to be an Uncle Tom attitude to win a place in the dominate white peer culture, at the most, or a sarcastic insult of the white student's ability to be able

to "make it" easier than the black, at the least. The fact that some highly loaded negative words, while eliciting some very negative responses, do not mean anything special in different racial setting for the white student seems to reveal that on one level, at least, the white student expresses no racial prejudice. The word freak is interesting. Though the differential is small, only a plus two, it is enough to make us wonder if the interpretation of the word by the white youth when said by a black youth is that, "you are right, I am a freak to you as you are black and I am white." That this interpretation might hold is further supported by the fact that in Table III analyzing the black student responses, freak has the positive differential of plus three. The black student, therefore, seems to see the white youth's definition of freak reversed. It should not be assumed, however, that this positive differential means that this word is not a fighting word. Five black students said that they would fight over being called this--four in a black-white situation and one in an intra-racial situation. The words that carry the least differential for the black students are cool and bright with ass having no differential at all. This seems to indicate that the black students consider these words universal and unprejudiced terms. Rightly so, if one could hypothesize that the use of these words by whites to blacks makes for recognition by the dominate culture that the blacks, as either a group or an individual, are meeting some sort of "civilized" standard in the eyes of that dominate culture. That the black students show the greatest differential on punk (-17) and motherfucker (-11) supports the point

that fighting words are definitely loaded in the bi-racial situation. Punk for the white students shows a differential of -4 in the bi-racial setting. It is a -17 for black youth. Laying knowledge of the historical background of the Negro race in America one could easily understand why this would be. The negative overtones of the word--young, inexperienced, and associated with criminal behavior--would naturally put a person who has always been on the defensive in an even more guarding position to prove that he is not a punk. Fighting may not be the appropriate way to show his displeasure of the term, however, the righteous anger expressed in the comments of the black students--"It makes me mad," "It's a put down"--underscores the intensity of the insult.

That these sociolinguistic interpretations of reactions to such words might be valid is only hinted at in this survey. More interviewing and intensive research need by done before any of these intuitive hypotheses can become proven or disproven as statements of fact.

Tables V and VI further define the differential of Tables III and IV. These tables indicate the percentage of times the interpretations of words changed across race lines, that is the percentage of times there was one or more shifts among the four categories when there was change in the racial context as defined by the situation described in the questionnaire. Table V, the percentage of shift in the black student responses, points out that the list of words as a whole has almost double the number (67 versus 36) of negative shifts than Table VI, the percentage of shifts in the white student responses. With the black students,

47.9% shifted their meaning of punk in the bi-racial setting, while only 8.7% shifted to a negative position with the word bold. These percentages are in agreement with the differentials of Table III. Freak, however, which had a plus 3 differential, had actually a 26.1% negative shift and a 4.35% positive shift (for black youth) in the bi-racial setting. These percentages give further support of its fighting quality. Table VI, the percentage of times interpretation shifted in the minds of the white students, is not supportive of the differentials of Table IV. The white students express a much smaller percentage of shifts to the negative in the bi-racial situation than their black peers. This is counterbalanced, however, by a fairly large percentage of positive shifts relative to the percentage of positive shifts in Table V by the black students. For instance, ass which for the white students has the greatest percentage of negative shifts--24%--also has a 16% positive shift. This compares to a 21.75% negative shift and a 17.40% positive shift for the black youth. For the black students, however, this word creates less than half the amount of negative shifting when we remember that punk had 47.85% negative shift. These percentages tell an intriguing socio-linguistic tale. Punk, by definition, puts the insultee in a derogatory social class. Black students, having the long history of being second class citizens, would naturally be particularly sensitive to any terminology like punk which infers a class status repulsive to the dominate peer culture. Black youth could then be predicted to feel "super angry" when someone in a secure class position degrades their insecure class status. White students

in America, if only by virtue of their Caucasian ancestry, have a relatively secure class status. They would not, therefore, be as offended as their black peers by this fighting word. Ass, however, is an assassination of an individual's character. The white student, though confident of his class status, may easily feel insecure about his personal identity. If a black teen-ager were to insult him in this way, he could be expected to over-react, as he would consider the speaker to be in no position to attack his fragile self-identity. Freak still has some interesting figures attached to it. It has a 4% negative shift, but also a 8% positive shift which again reinforces the interpretation previously given to the word--that is, that to the white student, the black student is a freak because he is not white, and to the black student, the white student is a freak because he is not black.

What proved most interesting, perhaps more from semantic and sociological points of view than the linguistic perspective, was the comments asked for under part three of the survey instrument. The reasons the black students gave as to why they would fight if called certain words offers much insight into the students' sense of the essence of these words and the people who speak them.

> My mother is not a dog.
>
> I feel that this certain person doesn't have any business talking or insulting me if that person doesn't know me.
>
> If they know my name and can't call me by my name and call me something like that instead I know I will be ready to fight and it has happened before.
>
> If someone calls me a bitch they are calling my mother one and they have no right to judge someone they don't know.

The white students, while showing less degree of negative feelings in the numerical analysis of their responses, give more definite indications of their feelings about the words that would cause them to fight than their black counterparts.

> I don't feel that cuss words are proper and bring out the hate in one's feelings.
>
> I don't take nothin' off any spook, it really gets bad when they start insulting my mother.
>
> The person (calling me such names) has no respect for anyone else.

Eight of the twenty-five white students remarked they would choose not to fight, and eleven of the black students would prefer not to fight or would maintain peace at all costs. Their remarks indicate some rather sound insight into what is worthwhile in their young lives.

> I don't think words are enough to make me fight, I don't dig fighting anyway.
>
> (These) words are just showing your ignorance.
>
> Most people only fight to draw attention.
>
> Well, I don't like to fight to start with, but if I am forced to fight I will. But as far as it comes to calling people names, that doesn't help either. I mean calling people names is just showing how you are raced [sic] at home.

Perhaps much more could be done through analyzing and changing the home environment, but the survey does indicate that a study of the sociology of language in the high school setting has pertinent value in creating an atmosphere of understanding between the students and adult leaders.

I see three major hypotheses at which this survey hints. More extensive study should test to see what impact the socio-

linguistic dimensions of these hypotheses play in racial conflict in the secondary schools. They are:

a. Interpretations of word meaning by members of one racial community are often partially modified or completely changed by another racial community.

b. Where a clear experience of separate language socialization characterizes each racial community, conflict is likely to be derived from, if not exacerbated by, language differentiation.

c. Lack of recognition of different word meanings in various racial groups by controlling groups strengthens the inter-racial communications barrier as well as the communication barrier between the total black and white community and the controlling groups.

The first hypothesis has had a rather conclusive pretest in this small survey. It needs more careful investigation, however, along the lines formulated by David R. Heise in his article "Social Status, Attitudes, and Word Connotations," (Sociological Inquiry, Vol. 36, 1966: 227-239) where he argues that referent attitudes[2] towards words are derived from and associated with experience and that that "attitude continues as long as the pattern of experience producing it is unaltered."[3] He then introduces the idea that these personal referent attitudes are shared with prevailing general social attitudes in our highly complex society. When such attitudes do not agree, the balance theory can be brought into play. That is, if social referent attitude and personal referent attitude do not agree, tension and dissonance results, with the individual trying to escape that tension. The outlets available in this society are "avoidance and rejection, communication or instrumental action, restructuring, attitude change, or psychological defense mechanisms (repression, projection, regression, etc.)"[4] What then may happen is that the conflict may be reduced

between language and personal attitudes by restructuring the language itself through the use of synonyms and sublanguages and the vicious circle begins again.

Walt Wofram is one researcher who has begun to break this vicious circle with substantial research supporting the relatively new concept that Black English[5] is a dialect, yes, but also a language with its own rules of grammar and pronunciation separate from that used by speakers of standard American English. The acceptance of this point, at least among sociolinguistics, may eventually affect the IQ testing and interviewing of black students. Labov in his study of black children in the ghettoes of New York has proven that future research must take this into account. His recent study recorded in The Florida Reporter entitled "The Logic of Non-Standard English" gives an excellent analysis of how verbal and verbose as well as grammatically correct ghetto black children are given the right setting in which to communicate.[5] Even if the interviewer is black but from the middle class which the child may recognize through his speech patterns, the child is automatically on the defensive as our black high school students were and is very non-verbal to the point of lying to preserve some semblance of being a person in his own right. Using some aspects of these tested theories in a more extended study of the peer groups in a multi-racial high school may bring into clearer focus the degree to which interpretations of word meaning are used to determine self-image and group identity, as well as the capability to ignore the personal racial overtones of words to comprehend, if not accept, other

racial or ethnic interpretations. This latter idea is raised in a very early study (1961) by Ernest Barth in his article "Language Behavior of Negroes and Whites" (Pacific Sociological Review, Vol. 4, 1961: 66-72.) His groups were from the same middle class status level but he noticed that to blacks words seemed to have a more personalized meaning, used in evaluative, emotive fashion, and the words used tended to be less abstract terms than their white counterparts used. This, too, would have to be considered when either drawing up an instrument or analyzing data of a more advanced study. Some of this has already been done in our little survey and the implications are great. For one, how does a black student react to the great number of abstract words used in his studies, let alone the ones used in conversation by his white peers? And reversely, how easily can a white student accept, understand, and contend with the emotionally charged use of words by his black colleague? And perhaps of greater importance do these differences still hold water, or has the political atmosphere of the last five years changed the teen-agers feeling of both types of words? Our survey indicates that this is not so with loaded fighting words, but that is a small part of the total teenage argot used today.

The second hypothesis dealing with separate language socialization being one reason for conflict is an extension of the first. Labov's work is again an excellent indicator of what can be done to bring to light the sensitivity of the black student especially about verbal behavior and its influence in creating conflicts of all degrees between racial groups. His pointing

out of the defensive that black children are on when it comes to verbalizing their feelings and ideas makes it very clear why the atmosphere of our multi-racial high schools is so charged with tensions. How separate language socialization creates barriers to communication is also briefly touched upon in Wolfram's work in Black English. He notices that "in terms of some of the ritualistic uses of language in the black community, it is...observed that it is teenagers(particularly males) who are mainly responsible for carrying on the tradition of ritualistic language. Language rituals such as "sounding" (the ritualistic game in which the mother is insulted), "signifying" (the ritualistic game of insulting another person directly), and "rapping" (a fluent and lively way of talking characterized by a high degree of personal style, show definite patterns of age-grading."[6] May these patterns not also reveal a definite pattern of racial language identification? As each of these patterns demand a personal, emotive involvement, it is clear why black youths are very sensitive to verbal speech constructions and diction. One question, does this hold true for white youth?

The third hypothesis is strictly intuitive. Any interaction on the basis of verbal communication between school officials and the student body can be considered in the same way as we have dealt with the communication problem between racial peer groups. It, therefore, becomes an ad hoc thesis to the first two. It seems, however this is ultimately the most important area where meaningful communication must be established. Perhaps this sounds a bit like history with all the high school and college

students insisting on having a voice in curriculum and forming the administrative policies of the schools. The question asked, though, is about communication and understanding meanings of words when used by very different racial and cultural groups, not about power-play. They are linked, yes, but is there communication here or is there simply a stronger tightening of the separate language socializations by each group as well as by the controlling group? Ultimately, it is to this question that I wish to address further study. We have come a long way from the court case and twelve words from the present teenage argot. That such a journey is possible from the brief observations of some sociolinguistic patterns and reactions illuminates a path of research which needs to be undertaken. What work has been done is good but it is not enough to provide the people who work in and with the schools adequate materials which would serve to create an atmosphere of constructive learning and thus help end the conflicts besetting our schools before they start.

Table 1

A NUMERICAL COUNT OF BLACK STUDENT RESPONSES
IN EACH CATEGORY AND SITUATION

Total of 23 students in survey

Word	Feel Good		Don't Care		Feel Bad		Feel Angry		Or Something Else*	
	S1**	S2***	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2
Bold	1	1	17	16	4	2	1	4		
A Punk	0	0	8	3	8	1	5	17	1	1
Together	15	11	5	11	0	0	0	1		
A Son of a Bitch	0	0	2	2	4	1	12	14	5	5
A Pimp	0	0	13	12	3	2	5	6		
A Motherfucker	1	0	4	2	5	1	7	14	5	6
Cool	15	12	6	10	0	0	1	0		
An Ass	0	0	8	8	5	3	9	10	1	2
A Bastard	1	0	4	3	5	1	11	14	1	5
Bright	14	13	9	10	0	0	0	0		
A Pig	0	0	10	8	5	2	7	10	1	3
A Freak	0	0	5	6	6	1	11	12	1	4

*Or something else unanimously meant FIGHT to the respondents who wrote in their feelings under this heading.

**S1 means situation one where one person is speaking to another of his own age and race.

***S2 means situation two where one person is speaking to another his own age but of a different race.

Table.2.

A NUMERICAL COUNT OF WHITE STUDENT RESPONSES
TO EACH CATEGORY AND SITUATION

Total of 25 in survey

Word	Feel Good		Don't Care		Feel Bad		Feel Angry		Or Something Else	
	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2
Bold	12	11	10	10	1	2	0	0	1	0
A Punk	1	0	12	10	1	2	10	11	1	1
Together	20	18	4	5	0	1	0	1	1	2
A Son of a Bitch	0	0	4	5	2	1	18	18	0	1
A Pimp	0	2	9	6	3	3	13	14		
A Motherfucker	0	0	4	3	2	2	18	18	1	2
Cool	19	18	5	6	0	0	0	0	0	1
An Ass	0	0	10	11	7	2	8	12	0	0
A Bastard	0	0	6	5	3	3	16	16	0	1
Bright	14	11	7	12	1	0	1	1	1	0
A Pig	0	0	9	8	4	4	11	13	1	0
A Freak	0	1	16	14	2	1	7	7	0	0

Table 3

ANALYSIS OF THE NUMERICAL COUNT OF BLACK STUDENT RESPONSES IN INTERRACIAL AND INTRA-RACIAL LANGUAGE CONTEXT

EXPLANATION OF PROCEDURE: Each of the four categories were weighted numerically as follows:

Feel Good +1
Don't Care 0
Feel Bad -1
Feel Angry -2

The rationale for such weighting is that angry is clearly different from bad and that good and bad are equal opposites.

Word	Situation 1 (interracial)	Situation 2 (intra-racial)	Differential*
A Punk	-18	-35	-17
Motherfucker	-18	-29	-11
Together	+15	+9	-6
Bold	-5	-9	-4
A Bastard	-26	-29	-3
A Pig	-19	-22	-3
A Son of a Bitch	-28	-29	-1
A Pimp	-13	-14	-1
Cool	+13	+12	-1
Bright	+14	+13	-1
An Ass	-23	-23	0
A Freak	-28	-25	+3

*The differential indicates the negative or positive shift between situation one (intra-racial) and situation two (interracial) for the purpose of discovering which types of words create the least change in attitude and which create the most change in attitudes.

Table 4

ANALYSIS OF WHITE STUDENT RESPONSES

Word	Situation 1 (interracial)	Situation 2 (intra-racial)	Differential*
Bright	+28	+20	-8
Together	+20	+13	-7
A Punk	-20	-24	-4
A Pig	-26	-30	-4
An Ass	-23	-26	-3
Cool	+38	+36	-2
Bold	+24	+22	-2
A Pimp	-29	-29	0
A Motherfucker	-38	-38	0
A Bastard	-35	-35	0
A Son of a Bitch	-38	-37	+1
A Freak	-16	-14	+2

*See explanation after Table 3.

Table 5

PERCENTAGE OF TIMES INTERPPETATION OF WORDS SHIFTED ACROSS RACE LINES FOR BLACK STUDENTS

Word	Number of Positive Shifts	Number of Negative Shifts	No Shift
A Punk	4.35% (1)	47.85% (11)	47.85% (11)
A Pig	8.70% (2)	34.80% (8)	56.55% (13)
A Motherfucker	0% (0)	39.15% (9)	60.90% (14)
An Ass	17.40% (4)	21.75% (5)	60.90% (14)
A Bastard	0% (0)	34.80% (8)	65.25% (15)
Together	4.35% (1)	26.10% (6)	69.60% (16)
A Freak	4.35% (1)	26.10% (6)	69.60% (16)
A Pimp	13.05% (3)	13.05% (3)	73.95% (17)
Cool	4.35% (1)	17.40% (4)	78.30% (18)
A Son of a Bitch	0% (0)	13.05% (3)	87.25% (20)
Bright	4.35% (1)	8.70% (2)	87.25% (20)
Bold	0% (0)	8.70% (2)	91.60% (21)

Table 6

PERCENTAGE OF TIMES INTERPRETATION OF WORDS SHIFTED ACROSS RACE LINES FOR WHITE STUDENTS

Word	Number of Positive Shifts	Number of Negative Shifts	No Shift
An Ass	16% (4)	24% (6)	60% (15)
A Pimp	16% (4)	20% (5)	64% (16)
A Bastard	12% (3)	16% (4)	72% (18)
Bright	4% (1)	16% (4)	80% (20)
A Punk	4% (1)	16% (4)	80% (20)
Bold	8% (2)	12% (3)	80% (20)
Together	0% (0)	16% (4)	84% (21)
A Pig	8% (2)	8% (2)	84% (21)
A Freak	8% (2)	4% (1)	88% (22)
A Son of a Bitch	4% (1)	4% (1)	92% (23)
A Motherfucker	4% (1)	4% (1)	92% (23)
Cool	4% (1)	4% (1)	92% (23)

FOOTNOTES

1. The students were from Redford and Northwestern High Schools in Detroit, Michigan. The survey was taken in level three high school English classes.

2. Heise defines referent attitudes as "associations (that) are derived from experience."

3. David R. Heise, "Social Status, Attitudes, and Word Connotations," (Sociological Inquiry, Vol. 36, No. 2, Spring 1961) 227.

4. Ibid., 229.

5. Walt Wolfram, Some Illustrative Features of Black English (Paper given at Center for Applied Linguistics Workshop on Language Differences, Coral Gables, Florida, February, 1970.) On page one Wolfram notes that he will use the term Black English to denote the non-standard dialect as spoken by most blacks. "That there is no established term used to denote this dialect is a reflection of the fact that the legitimacy of the dialect has only been recognized in the last several years."

6. Ibid., 8.

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